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Regional Seminar on the Sustainable Development Goals and Gender Equality for the Parliaments of the Middle East and North Africa

Alexandria, Egypt, 18-20 September 2018

Organized jointly by the Inter-Parliamentary Union, the House of Representatives of Egypt
and the Arab Inter-Parliamentary Union

Under the high patronage of the Egyptian Minister of Investment and International Cooperation, Dr. Sahar Nasr

OUTCOME DOCUMENT

Presented by the Rapporteurs of the Regional Seminar, Ms. Jameela Ali Salman, Member of Parliament (Bahrain), and Mr. Kamal Ahmed, Member of Parliament (Egypt)

We, members of parliament from the Middle East and North Africa have gathered in Alexandria, Egypt, from 18 to 20 September 2018, for a Regional Seminar on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Gender Equality. The seminar was jointly organized by the House of Representatives of Egypt, the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) and the Arab Inter-Parliamentary Union (AIPU). We are grateful to the Library of Alexandria for hosting the event and receiving us with great hospitality.

By adopting the SDGs our countries have committed to creating a paradigm shift aiming for a participatory, more transparent, more inclusive and more sustainable approach to development. We discussed how we as parliamentarians can do our part to help achieve the SDGs in our countries and the region. We recognized the critical importance of Goal 5 on gender equality and Goal 16 on peace, justice and strong institutions for the implementation of the SDGs framework in our region.

The seminar served as a forum for exchange of knowledge and experiences and good practices. Discussion was facilitated by presentation of the IPU action plans, the IPU/UNDP SDGs Self-Assessment Toolkit and contribution from experts of partner organizations, including the National Council for Women (Egypt), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), UN WOMEN, UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) and Equality Now.

Our discussions addressed the following questions: What are the key elements of strong parliamentary action on gender equality and SDGs? How can parliaments in our region implement gender mainstreaming and integrate the SDGs in their work? How can we, as parliamentarians, play a more active role in the implementation process, including reforming legal frameworks, assessing budgets, monitoring the impact of legislation and policy implementation?

We proactively engaged in these issues and drew up the following conclusions, actions and recommendations to advance parliamentary engagement with the SDGs and gender equality:

1. Parliament plays a pivotal role in ensuring the achievement of the SDG and gender equality. To be effective and relevant, every parliament must fully exercise all its functions and ensure effective legislation, budget allocation, oversight and systematic evaluation of obstacles that stand in the way of continued progress. As the key institution of democracy, parliament must

ensure that all segments of the population contribute to and benefit from the SDGs. Without equal opportunities and social justice there will be no sustainable development.

2. The SDGs represent a useful people-centred framework that can drive the sustainable development of our societies, in particular if gender equality is taken into account in a cross-cutting manner so as to inform all our work on the goals. Women are the nucleus of society and their empowerment is key to advancing progress. The political will to make advances in these areas needs to continue and strengthen.
3. Governance, as represented by Goal 16, is a key driver of change. Peace, the rule of law, justice, effective, accountable and inclusive institutions, and several other elements of Goal 16, provide the enabling environment that is needed to engage our countries and our people effectively in the SDGs agenda. Effective parliaments are central to implementation of this goal. Men and women parliamentarians should work together and with all stakeholders to invest in the development and strengthening of parliament.
4. Several countries in our region continue to suffer from conflict, occupation, terrorism and humanitarian crises. This creates an important obstacle to efforts to achieve sustainable development and puts a huge strain on the institutions and the people, in particular women and girls, especially in Palestine. We send a clear message that peace and development are two sides of the same coin and that neither can be fully achieved unless all societies are firmly on the road to prosperity and stability. We call for strong global solidarity in ensuring that no country and no people are left behind in SDGs implementation.
5. Democratic and inclusive governance and institutions play an increasingly vital role in achieving the SDGs, as the former provide the foundation on which just and peaceful societies exist. We stress that women's equal participation in politics is a necessary aspect for more representative and inclusive parliaments. As we celebrate the increasing number of women in our parliaments, we express concern that progress is stagnating. We urge all parliaments to increase women's participation in every aspect of legislative work with a view to attaining gender equality and parity in politics and in parliaments by 2030, including by using electoral gender quotas where applicable.
6. We underscore the importance of coordinated institutional and monitoring frameworks for the SDGs as a precondition for implementation. There is no-one-size-fits-all and each parliament must analyse their capacities and define the most suitable mechanism to engage in SDGs implementation as soon as possible. We strongly encourage all parliaments in the region to carry out the IPU/UNDP SDGs self-assessment exercise, and we commit to launching this process in our own parliaments.
7. In addition to institutions and frameworks, we recognize the importance of citizen engagement in achieving the SDGs and gender equality. As a priority, there is much space for improvement of societal cultures with respect to equality, inclusiveness and respect for our environment and the planet. As representatives of the people, parliamentarians should serve as role models in driving this change which it is most difficult to achieve. They need to lead by example and develop clear, understandable and focused messages that will resonate with the people and inspire change.
8. Our countries have already achieved important gains in ensuring gender equality and empowerment of women. The SDGs framework presents an opportunity to further implement policy and legal changes directed at tackling discrimination against girls and women, increasing the number of women in making decisions at all levels in society and influencing the allocation of resources in a gender-sensitive manner.
9. We recognize the importance of international human rights conventions and other instruments for the achievement of the SDGs and gender equality. CEDAW has been ratified by many countries in our region. It also represents a key roadmap to all countries to achieve women's rights as an integral part of human rights. Parliaments should continue to play a central role in

translating CEDAW into national legislation and policies, and in overseeing implementation. Equally important, parliamentarians should advocate for strong measures and enforcement programmes to end violence against women, urge governments to translate their international commitments into national legislations and ensure women's economic empowerment.

10. We applaud the tireless work of women parliamentary caucuses, both nationally and regionally, to ensure gender equality in our region and the progress achieved so far. We recognize that gender equality is a shared responsibility of both women and men. This kind of cooperation, continued dialogue and further opportunities for women MPs to provide input are a good way to ensure effective and inclusive national policy frameworks.
11. We recognize the importance of data for successful and informed political decision-making. Data management systems need to be redefined and developed, so that data is adequately and effectively integrated into legal and policy decisions that concern SDGs implementation and gender equality. Parliaments need to establish close cooperation with statistical bodies and make sure that they work in an environment that is conducive to producing reliable, relevant and useful information, as well as to ensure citizens' right to information within legislative frameworks.
12. The importance of partnerships in achieving the SDGs and gender equality cannot be overestimated. As parliamentarians proactively engage on these issues, they need to reach out to civil society, the private sector and other partners—from grassroots to the global level—and foster robust partnerships that will deliver for citizens and the world. We propose the establishment of an Arab coalition to achieve the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the adoption of a unified Arab strategy for the upcoming action plan. We recognize the importance of the IPU as an important platform for partnerships and cooperation among parliaments, and between parliament and the United Nations and other stakeholders.
13. We recognize the importance of Voluntary National Reviews as an important impetus for action on the SDGs and we urge parliaments to work with their respective governments, to contribute to this process and participate in sustainable development committees. We congratulate the countries of the region that have already presented their reports to the High Level Political Forum and urge others to follow suit. We take note that there will be a review of SDG 16 in 2019 and we recommend that our countries seize this opportunity to highlight the specific difficulties our region grapples with in terms of peace, stability and security.

In order to inspire action on gender equality and SDGs, we will bring this Outcome Document to the attention of our colleagues in parliament through all possible channels. We also undertake to promote and bring the document to the attention of other relevant stakeholders.

We urge the IPU to bring our conclusions and recommendations to the attention of the global parliamentary community and ensure follow-up through its programmes and Assemblies. We also urge the IPU to continue to facilitate exchanges of good practices and experiences among parliamentarians from our region in order maximize their contribution and inspire action to achieve development, equality and peace throughout the world.